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Shorebirds Could Be Sandy Beneficiaries

Great Expectations for Piping Plovers at the Shore

By PAT JOHNSON | Apr 17, 2013



Photo by: Ted Shulenski

A pair of piping plovers stakes out their territory in Barnegat Light.

Superstorm Sandy has actually done some good for the nesting shorebirds of Long Beach Island.

“You hear about how hurricanes can do damage to wildlife, erode some bay beaches and destroy osprey nests and such, but beach-nesting birds rely on storms to create new habitat,” said Todd Pover, the Beach Nesting Birds Project manager for the state Department of Environmental Protection and for the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey.

[piping plovers](#)



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When Sandy caused the Atlantic Ocean to breach the normal beach area and overwash the Island in the dunes of Barnegat Light and the Edwin B. Forsythe Refuge in Holgate, it left exciting opportunities for plovers, least terns, skimmers and oystercatchers.

“Contrary to what you might think, beach-nesting birds don’t prefer dunes. They like to be out in the open in the shell area where they can see predators,” said Pover. “They like flat, shelly areas, and Barnegat Light is almost a perfect example of a perfect beach for them. We are expecting to see more birds use it.”

Pover said what Sandy did to the beach face is akin to what wildfires do in the Pine Barrens. “Wildfire opens up canopies, and new species thrive in it. It’s the same with the beaches; storms can regenerate habitat,” he said. “The caveat to that is that storm protection is a concern, and we have to rebuild dunes, but we are hoping that there will be selective instances where they will leave the natural beach. In Barnegat Light there are very wide beaches and large dunes, and we’re hoping some of that will be left as Sandy created it for shorebirds to use.”

A fenced-off area, a circle of safety for courting piping plovers, was erected near Barnegat Light State Park last week, just in time for the arrival of the first mating pair. Signs explaining why the area is off-limits are up, and roving shorebird monitors will gently explain why dogs can’t be on the beach during nesting season.

Piping plovers are an endangered species in the United States and Canada, and since they nest on the beach, close enough to forage on the wrack line of the waves, their nests are vulnerable to storms, dogs, predators, people and vehicles such as beach buggies.

The birds are small and have a two-toned pattern that disguises them among the shells when resting, but their bright orange legs give them away as they skitter along the sands of the Atlantic, nipping up tidbits from the sea.

In spring, the male will have a completely black breast-band while the female has only a partial collar, and this identifies them as a breeding pair.

In New Jersey the number of nesting pairs hovers around 120, said Pover. "It's a pretty flat recovery trend. But their range is wide, and there has been a steady movement upwards since the plover was listed (as endangered)."

In Barnegat Light's newly created overwash areas, shorebird monitors will be checking to identify any new bird nesting sites.

"Plovers are one of those birds with strong 'site fidelity,' a technical term that means they come back to the same location every year," said Pover. Last year the Barnegat Light area was home to just three nesting pairs. With the new larger, flatter beach areas, more birds are expected. "They will also colonize suitable new habitat," said Pover.

On the southernmost end of Long Beach Island is the Edwin B. Forsyth Wildlife Refuge in Holgate. Every year the wilderness beach has been closed in summer for beach-nesting birds. But Forsythe Manager Virginia Rettig said the area has been closed to pedestrians and vehicles since Superstorm Sandy.

"There's been a sand reclamation project at the end of road, with a big sand separator that screens it to get all the junk out of it so they can use it again, and now that it's April, the refuge will be closed through the summer," she said. Interns at the refuge will be stationed at the access point to remind people the area is closed to help the nesting birds. They will also be monitoring the numbers and success of the nests.

In addition to the plover expectations, Rettig is anticipating a larger nesting bird population in general this year than last, due to Sandy. "Last year on Little Beach (an island just off the refuge to the south) we had 20 nesting pairs of plovers and on Holgate we had 10 or 12.

"I'm excited to see what this summer will bring in these overwash areas. I'm excited to see what benefit there will be to the breeding pairs. Only time will tell."

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